

# A CITRINE WAGTAIL

(*Motacilla citreola*)

## SIGHTING FROM ARNHEM LAND, N.T.

by John L. McKean

On 27 December 1981 Richard Woods, Glen Ingram, Pamela Grice and I were searching for Yellow Chats (*Epthianura crocea*) on the South Alligator River flood plain about 0.5km south of the Arnhem Highway, N.T. As we strolled through a peninsula of short grass along the edge of an *Eleocharis* dominated marsh, a *Motacilla* wagtail was disturbed from under a sedge tussock. Its call on flushing was different enough from that of a Yellow Wagtail (*M. flava*) to alert Woods and myself to pay keen attention to its features through binoculars as it ascended, still calling, into the air. It landed on the other side of the swamp, but several minutes later flew back calling, high over the top of us. Despite a diligent search for the bird, later that day and during the next, by ourselves and others, it was not re-located.

Our composite description is as follows. Call 'zee-ee-eet', shriller than that of the Yellow Wagtail (McKean, Ingram and Woods) and the phrases were considered shorter (Woods, Ingram). The calls were totally unlike those of the Grey Wagtail (*cinerea*) or the Pied Wagtail (*alba*). McKean has had extensive experience with Yellow and Grey Wagtails in Indonesia and Northern Australia, while Woods, a citizen of Northern Ireland, has had extensive experience of the Yellow, Grey and Pied Wagtails in Europe. The colour of the back, rump and mantle was concolorous and darker than that of a Yellow Wagtail and was

described as grey or dark grey brown. Due to our preoccupation with the ventral surface of the bird, wing bars were not looked for (McKean and Woods). The breast was of-white below with a greyish longitudinal patch on the left flank (Woods) and a broken row of greyish spots across the chest (McKean). A superciliary stripe was noted (McKean), and outmost remiges were white (McKean and Woods). The tail was not noticeably long as in the Grey Wagtail and seemed to us approximately the same length as that of the Yellow Wagtail.

On the basis of the criteria advanced by Svensson (1977) the bird seems to be a first year Citrine or Yellow-headed Wagtail.

David Eades (pers. comm.) has, however, advised us that some of the identification characters given by Svensson have been queried by British bird watchers. In the event of any further advance in knowledge as to identification criteria for Citrine Wagtails our sighting would merit re-examination.

The first and only previous sight record of a Citrine Wagtail in Australia occurred during July 1962 in the vicinity of Botany Bay, in the southern metropolitan area of Sydney. The bird, an adult male, was present in the area for at least three days (McGill, 1963).

The distribution and migratory patterns of the various subspecies of Citrine Wagtails are also discussed by McGill (loc. cit) and thus do not warrant repeating here.

### REFERENCES

- McGILL, A.R. (1963) "A Record of the Yellow-headed Wagtail for Australia" *Emu* 63:66-71.
- SVENSSON, L. (1977). "Problemat att skilja ung citronarla *Motacilla citreola* från andra arterer. Var. Fagelv. 36:48-52.